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SPORTS

Winchester volleyball team makes Elite 8, before falling to Needham in hard-fought battle

JOE MCCONNELL | SPORTS EDITOR

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The 2024 Winchester High volleyball team consists of sophomore Defne Mergen (1), sophomore Bella Comes (2), sophomore Maddie Crooks (3), junior Johanna Melhorn (5), junior Julia Campo (6), sophomore Vivianna Cella (7), senior Juliana Xu (9), senior Helen Zhou (10), sophomore Karen Huai (11), senior captain Margo Kaduson (14), senior Maeve Collins (15), sophomore Hazel Lovins (16), junior Gwen Gaiko (19), junior Nora Harstad (21), head coach John Fleming, assistant coach Jackie Oliver and team manager Miraya
COURTESY PHOTO

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The Winchester High School volleyball team (20-3) started the postseason as the 13th seed in Division 1 with 18 wins. They then went 2-1 in the state tournament after falling to Needham (17-6, fifth seed) in the Elite 8, 3-1.

But Needham was then shutdown by Newton North (24-1, top seed), the eventual state champs, in a state semifinal matchup, 3-0. The Tigers then went on to beat Brookline (19-4), the second seed, in the state title match by the same score.

“We were not surprised at all by our tournament run,” said Coach John Fleming. “Truthfully, I think all the girls feel like we very well could have continued on. I think they believed in themselves, even if the power rankings had us as the 13th seed. We knew that we had a legitimate shot to make a run at the state title. Our hope is that this year's group raised the bar to motivate next year's team to go even further in 2025.”

From the Needham game, captain Helen Zhou (21 kills, 15 digs), Johanna Melhorn (11 kills, 8 blocks), captain Margo Kaduson (2 aces, 19 digs) and Defne Mergen (42 assists) were the Winchester team leaders in the Round of 8 matchup.

“Helen had one of her best hitting games of the season,” Fleming said, after the Needham encounter. “To finish her (scholastic) career with 21 kills at such a high percentage is incredibly impressive. Likewise, her co-captain (Kaduson) also finished on a high note. She passed and served very well. For someone who was named Middlesex League MVP, she somehow seemed to take her game to even a higher level in the state tournament.”

Fleming admitted it took his team until the third set against Needham to really start playing the way they are capable of playing.

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"I'm really proud of the fight that the girls showed," the veteran coach said. "They could have easily backed down and lost in three, but they showed some real grit and found a way to win the third. The fourth set truly could have gone either way. We had our chances to win, but couldn't capitalize. Volleyball is a game of momentum, and I think if we had pulled off the fourth set, we could've taken that right into the fifth with a good chance to win the sectional title."

Against Attleboro in the Sweet 16, Kaduson (4 aces, 16 digs), Melhorn (3 aces, 7 blocks), Hazel Lovins (16 kills), Zhou (14 kills) and Mergen (36 assists) helped the Red & Black secure the win, 3-1, the same score they defeated Andover by in the Round of 32 to begin the postseason.

"(Melhorn) was such a force at the net against Attleboro," said Fleming. "We needed a big-time presence there against such a potent offensive group. Both outsides needed to get us kills to offset their offenses weapons, and Helen and Hazel did just that.

"(Mergen) continues to prove herself as a top tier setter," added Fleming. "She is really understanding the game, and also how to move our offense to get advantages over the defense.

"The girls came ready to play against Attleboro. From the start of the match, they were ready to play, and competed at a really high level," he continued. "I'm not sure many people in the gym believed that we could hang with Attleboro, let alone beat them, but I think early on, the girls figured out that they could, despite their size and power. They also have perhaps the best hitter in the state.

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"Winning the first set was really important for us, and I think that momentum carried over to the second set," he finished. "From there, we knew they'd fight back, but we kept on trying to focus on the next point being the most important. The fourth set was close, and then Margo finished it off with a tremendous run on serves."

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Winchester boys basketball heads to Bridgewater-Raynham for Sweet 16 game after beating Lexington in postseason opener

It was the third meeting this year between Middlesex League boys basketball rivals Lexington (16-5, 11th seed) and Winchester (17-4, 22nd seed). They split the first two during the regular season, thus making this Round of 32 postseason matchup the impromptu rubber game of this year's series, with the

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The Winchester High boys hockey team (12-9-2), the 17th seed, edged the 16th-seeded Wachusett Regional Mountaineers (18-2-1), 5-4 in a Round of 32 Division 1 state tournament game at Westborough's Northstar Ice Arena on Feb. 25. The Red & Black will now take on top seed Catholic Memorial (18-2-1)

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SPORTS

With postseason starting Friday night, WHS boys hoop seniors English, Sarpong, Burbine join Middlesex League elite

The Winchester High boys basketball team, the 22nd seed, will take on Middlesex League rival Lexington, the 11th seed, to begin the Division 1 state tournament in the Round of 32 on Friday night, Feb. 27, starting at 6 p.m. These teams are so evenly matched, beginning with the

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Two candidates for Winchester's School Committee will face voters at a forum as the district navigates a new literacy curriculum, budget pressures and questions about student mental health. Heather von Mering and John Bellaire are competing for an open seat on the School Committee, which oversees a budget von

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Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

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